VF- Battle of France

CHAPTER 15

Ordeal on the Somme

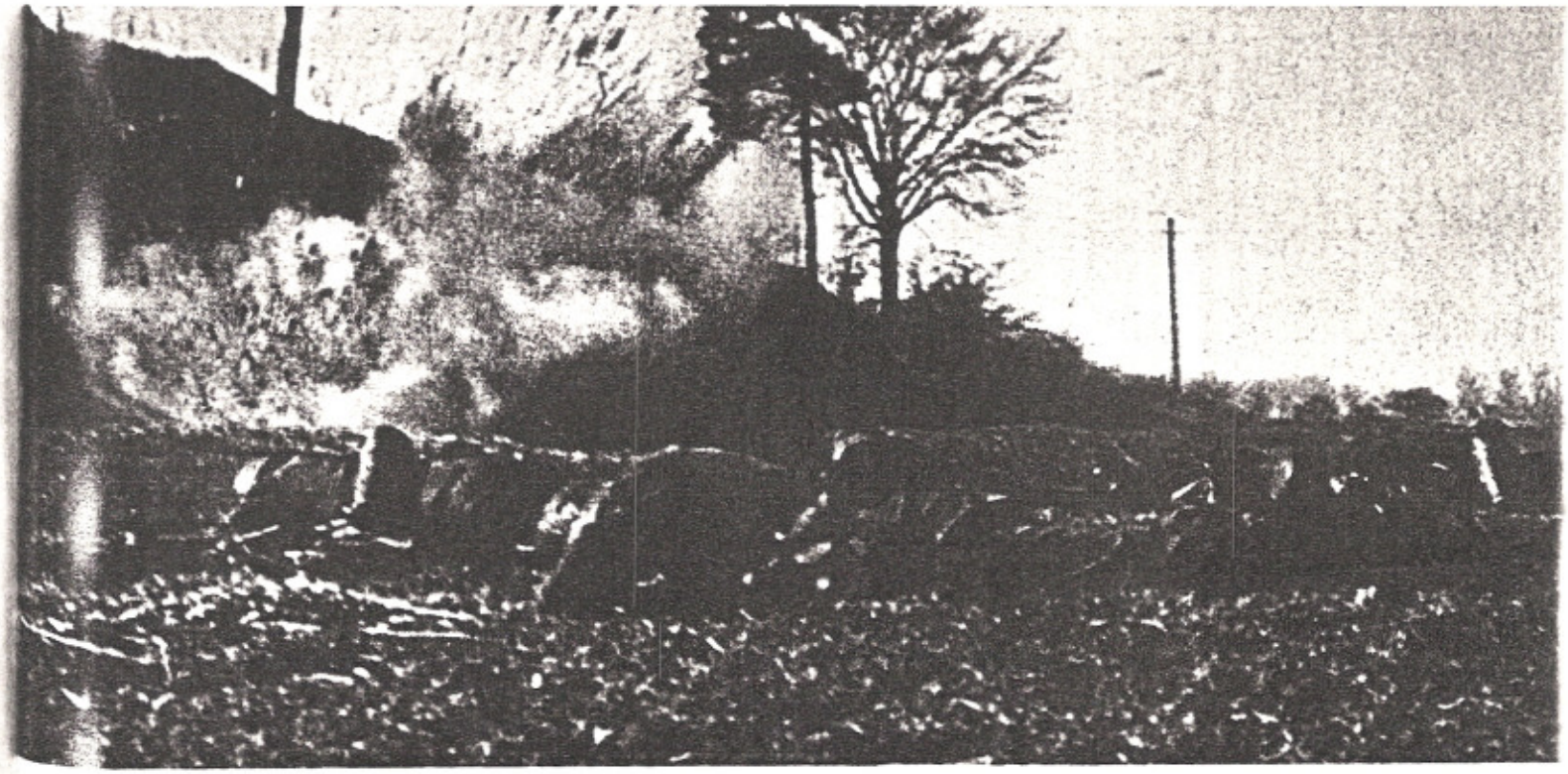
The disastrous course of events in Flanders had forced Weygand to abandon his plan of a joint counter-attack against the "Panzer Corridor". It was even more vital, however, that the bridgeheads won by the Germans on the left bank of the Somme should be destroyed. The outcome of the defensive battle which now had to be fought between Longuyon and Abbeville depended largely upon this.

To this end the French 7th Army and the forces under Altmayer (renamed 10th Army on May 28) were sent into action along the Somme while the retreat to Dunkirk and the evacuation were still in progress.

Upstream of Péronne, the efforts of General Toussaint's 19th Division, ably assisted by the tanks of 2nd Armoured Division under Colonel Perré, restored the French front along the Somme. Between Péronne and Amiens the Germans were also pushed back, but there they managed to hold on to their bridgehead across the river. It was hardly surprising that these counter-attacks were only partially successful. They were made by divisions which were flung into battle one by one and which, given their small numbers, had to cover too wide a front.

The reduction of the Abbeville bridgehead was entrusted to de Gaulle's 4th Armoured Division, hastily re-formed since its raids on May 17 and 19, and reinforced with six infantry battalions. The division attacked on the afternoon of May 28. It struck at the positions held by a regiment of Lieutenant-General Blümm's 57th Division and caused much panic, for the German 3.7-cm anti-tank guns could not pierce the heavy armour of the French tanks. But because it was not promptly exploited, de Gaulle's success was fleeting. During the night of May 28–29, Blümm's force was reinforced by two 8.8-cm flak batteries, and their guns soon demonstrated, as they had done at Arras, their devastating power against tanks.

On May 29–30, the 4th Armoured Division made limited progress but failed to clear the crest of Mont Caubert; by the third day of the battle the division had taken some 500 prisoners, but it had been reduced to a mere 34 tanks. Finally called off on June 3, the counter-attack at Abbeville had achieved little – and on the 5th, Bock's army group attacked along the entire Somme front.



▽ *German infantry under bombardment during the advance on Paris. The French defence, inspired by the presence of Weygand, was improving steadily and taking a considerable toll of the invaders. This greatly surprised the Germans, who had expected their first quick advances to shatter the French defence beyond any hope of repair.*

Weygand's defence plan

Between the last embarkations from Dunkirk and the unleashing of Operation "Red" – the second and final phase of the Battle of France – there was a pause of little more than a single day.

Although Weygand was bombarded with a constant, bewildering stream of disastrous and disconcerting news, it must be said that he reacted with promptitude and energy throughout. Most of his decisions were sound, and above all there was the powerful, morale-boosting influence which he exerted on his subordinates. In a few days he had restored the spirit of the front-line troops to a remarkable degree. And the evidence for this can be found less on the French side than in the war diaries and memoirs of the Germans.

Weygand had shown his mettle as early as May 24, in a note laying down the measures to be taken against German armour supported by aircraft. On May 26, after his new defence plan had received the unanimous approval of the War Committee presided over by the President of the Republic, he issued the following "General Order of Operations":

"1. The battle on which the fate of the country depends will be fought without any idea of retreat from the positions which we occupy now. All commanders, from army commander to corporal, must be animated by the fierce resolve to stand and fight until death. If commanders set the example their troops will stand; and they will have the right to compel obedience if necessary.

2. To be certain of halting the enemy, constant aggressiveness is essential. If the enemy shows signs of attacking on any sector, we must reply with swift and brutal counter-methods.

If the enemy succeeds in establishing a bridgehead in our front which he can use for rushing in tanks and then moving on to an armoured attack, it is essential – no matter how insignificant the bridgehead may be – to drive the enemy back to his lines with artillery fire and air strikes, and to

▽ *Reconnaissance vehicles of a Panzer division enter the ruins of a northern French village, reduced to rubble by the Germans for the second time in 20 years.*

counter-attack. Infiltration must be countered with infiltration. If a unit believes that a neighbouring unit is wavering it must not at any cost fall back but must try to restore the situation. If this is impossible it must dig in and form a 'hedgehog' of resistance. This must apply to all units from divisional right down to company level.

3. The rear areas of the main defence line must be organised, in as great a depth as possible, into a checkerboard of centres of resistance, in particular on the main roads along which the Germans have always moved. Demolition charges must be prepared.
4. Every divisional general must be in constant touch with his colonels, the colonels with their battalion commanders, the battalion commanders with their company commanders, and the captains and lieutenants with their sections and their men.

Activity–Solidarity–Resolution."

Weygand's note of May 24 had anticipated the methods prescribed by this order. In the face of the "tank-aircraft tandem" attacks of the Blitzkrieg, it amounted to an improvised defensive tactic for which the French lacked sufficient means, but which nevertheless inflicted heavy losses on the victors of this first campaign in France.

Above all, Weygand believed, the Panzers must be cut off, decimated, and annihilated on a prepared battlefield. To do this meant, as he wrote: "substituting for the idea of the line the idea of control of communications", and this must be done by quartering the terrain, establishing the artillery in strongpoints and allocating a third of the artillery for anti-tank use, and by camouflaging all positions against air and ground observation.

A combination of these measures, he thought, would prevent the German infantry from following up as close support for those of their tanks which managed to infiltrate the French positions while the tanks themselves, cut off from the trucks bringing up their fuel and ammunition, would fall victim to the crossfire of the French infantry and artillery. At this critical moment for the attacker, the defenders could send in their infantry to mop up, or to launch more ambitious counter-attacks backed by tanks.

On June 5, 1940, the French lacked sufficient forces to man such a front, as well as the thousands of anti-personnel

△ *Nothing was safe from the bombing of the Stukas: here a French church blazes in the aftermath of a raid.* ◁ *The newly promoted General de Gaulle about to set off for a meeting of the Council of Ministers on June 6, to which he had been summoned in his capacity of Under-Secretary for War by Reynaud.*

◁◁ *A German anti-aircraft gun in action. Manned by Luftwaffe crews, such weapons kept pace with the leading German units to defend them from the expected counter-attack. But this never came: the French Air Force had been almost completely destroyed as a fighting force, and the only R.A.F. reinforcements promised by Churchill were fighter squadrons.*
◁ *German paratroops, infiltrating the French defence lines, dive for cover as a shell bursts just beside them. The struggle for the capital was not to last much longer –the city was declared open to avoid its destruction.*
▽ *Another penny packet mopped up: a member of a French Char B heavy tank crew surrenders.*

and anti-tank mines which it required. Apart from these fatal deficiencies, however, the type of front envisaged by Weygand was strikingly similar to the German defences which stopped the British and Americans in the Normandy *bocage* country after D-Day in 1944.

Could the plan have worked?

In his book *The War of Lost Opportunities* Colonel Goutard condemned Weygand's plan for being "merely a return to the classical doctrine of a continuous front". But this ignores the fact that the front envisaged by Weygand was far more flexible than previous conceptions of a static defence line, and that without an armoured reserve, any other disposition than the one prescribed by Weygand on May 26 would have laid France wide open to the onrush of the Panzers.

But when Weygand, with his forces diminished by a third, prepared to fight a defensive battle against an intact enemy, did such an armoured reserve exist? In his memoirs, de Gaulle says that it did. On June 1 he proposed the formation of two large armoured units from the 1,200 modern tanks still available for action. Supplied with infantry and artillery complements, he suggested that if the larger group were posted north of Paris and the other south of Rheims they could be used as an adequate mobile reserve. As de Gaulle put it, they would be able to strike at the flank "of any one of the German mechanised corps when, having broken through our front, they would be dislocated in width and extended in depth."

In his reply to General de Gaulle, prepared in 1955, Weygand excused himself for not remembering this suggestion. But he asserted that at the time he had no more

Paul Reynaud was born in 1878 and was trained as a lawyer. He served on the Western Front in World War I, and became a Deputy in 1919. In the early 1930's he held ministerial posts, but then fell out of favour until 1938, when he became Minister of Justice and later of Finance. He was a staunch advocate of tank warfare and opposition to Hitler. He was appointed Prime Minister on March 21, 1940, and resigned on June 16 when he failed to persuade his Cabinet to continue the war.

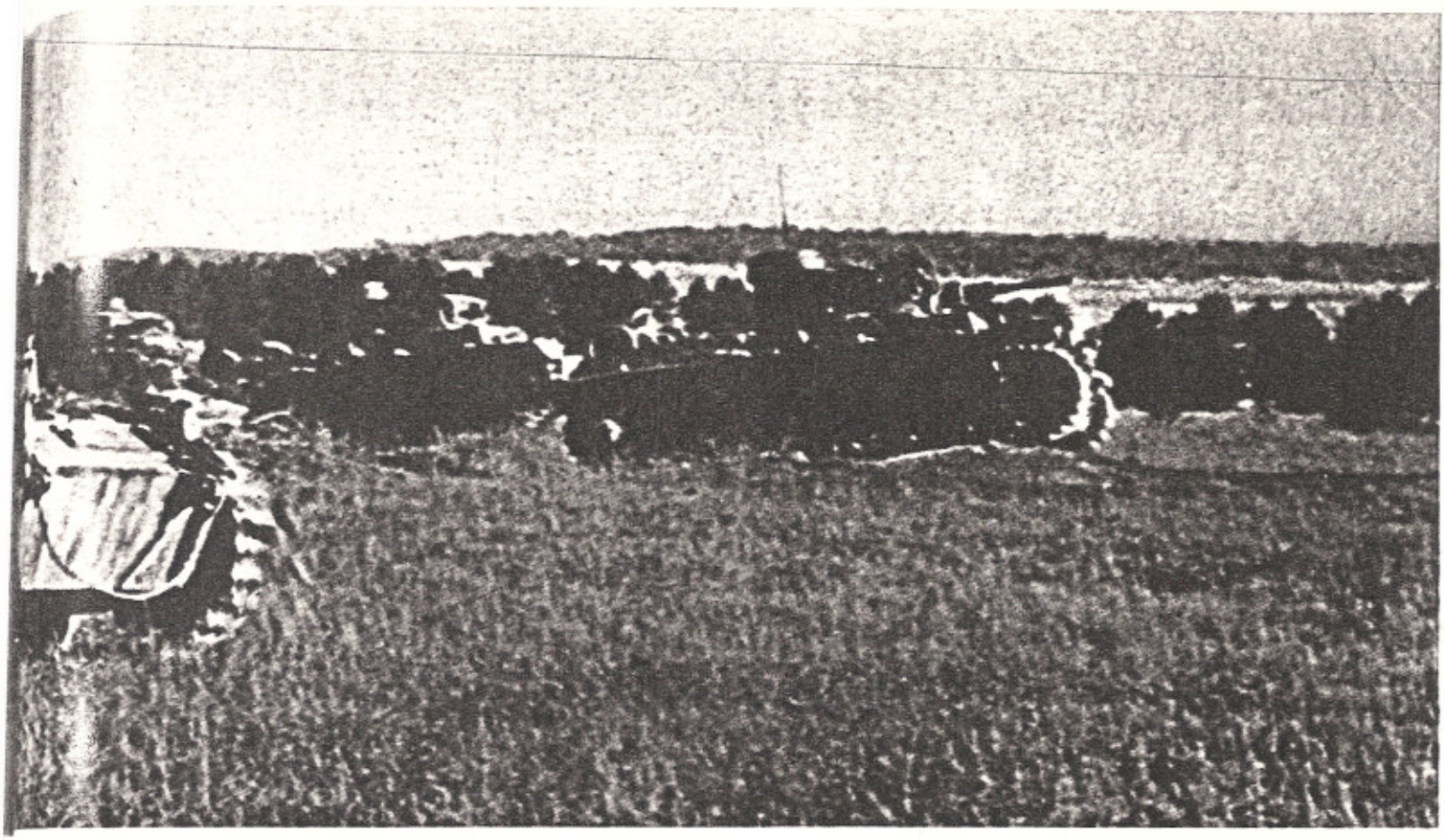
than 250 modern tanks at his disposal – not 1,200 – and this bears examination. A contemporary record gives only 86 tanks – Char B and Hotchkiss – to the 3rd Armoured Division, and 50 to the 4th Armoured. The figure for the 2nd Armoured Division on June 5 is not known, but it can hardly have been much higher than that of the other two. The 7th Light Mechanised Division was a recent formation, but even if it was at full strength it would have had only 174 tanks, of which half were Somua S-35's and half Hotchkiss H-35's. Even if the 2nd, 3rd, and 5th Light Cavalry Divisions had survived the disaster, they would have been reduced to skeleton strength.

Weygand's critics have argued that to attempt to defend both Paris and the Maginot Line could only have ended in disaster. This is a facile criticism. As far as Paris was concerned, calculations had been made to determine the effect on the French war effort of the loss of this or that line; and it was clear at the time that having already lost the industrial regions of the north, so vital to the production of tanks, it was essential to defend the line of the Somme and the Aisne.

As for the Maginot Line, it is true that shorter defensive fronts could have been selected, but at best the advantages to be gained by abandoning the Maginot Line could only have been purely military ones. The Rhine basin would have been lost, together with the strongpoints between the Rhine and the Moselle which enabled a front of 220 miles to be defended by a mere 17 divisions, of which ten were "Series B" reserve ones.

The 3rd Army Group had been transferred from the Saône to the Somme. General Garchery had handed over the 8th Army to General Laure, and 8th Army was now attached to 2nd Army Group, with the task of coping with any German attempt to cross the Rhine between Basle and Strasbourg, or to violate neutral Swiss territory. From Sélestat to Bitche stood Bourret's 5th Army, and then, covering the Moselle valley, Condé's 3rd Army. As Weygand had redeployed many of its units to other sectors, 4th Army's strength was reduced to General Hubert's group covering the Saar. In view of the signs which hinted at a possible offensive by the German Army Group "C" on the Saar and across the Rhine at Neuf-Brisach, General Prételat found that his 2nd Army Group had really been reduced to a dangerous level.

Weygand had promoted Huntziger from



△ *German Pzkw III medium tanks on the move. Together with the heavier Pzkw IV's, Pzkw III's were available only in limited numbers, and a few were allocated to each Panzer division as their main striking force.* ◁ *German infantry give a helping hand to a horse-drawn wagon laden with their supplies.*

Henri Philippe Pétain was born of peasant stock in 1856 and joined the army in 1876. He had a normal career and made his name in the defence of Verdun in 1916. He was appointed C.-in-C. of the French Army after the crippling mutinies of 1917 and his humane treatment did much to raise morale. In 1918 he was subordinated to the Allied C.-in-C., Foch, but promoted to Marshal just after the war. Between the wars he served in Morocco, the government, as Inspector-General of the Army, and as Ambassador to Spain until 1940, when he was recalled to join the government.

the command of 2nd Army to that of the new 4th Army Group. The 2nd Army, taken over by General Freydenberg, covered the passes of the Argonne; to the left of 2nd Army, General Réquin's 4th Army held the line of the Aisne between Attigny and Neufchâtel. The 12 divisions of the 4th Army Group had a front of 75 miles to cover; but although the Argonne forest favoured the defenders, the rolling chalk countryside of Champagne was so well adapted to tank warfare that it had been christened the "tankodrome" in French military circles.

Finally, the 150 miles of front between Neufchâtel-sur-Aisne and Abbeville were covered by General Besson's 3rd Army Group. This was made up of three armies: General Touchon's 6th Army on the Aisne; General Frère's 7th Army blocking the approaches to Compiègne and Beauvais; and General Altmayer's 10th Army on the lower Somme. With one division per 8½ miles of front, General Besson's army group presented a very over-stretched network of strongpoints – while the Germans had seven bridgeheads on the left bank of the Somme.

Counting the 16 infantry divisions in army group or supreme command reserve, the seven armoured, mechanised, and cavalry divisions, and the four British and Polish divisions still in France, Weygand had at his disposal a force of 71 divisions. But even to arrive at this unimpressive total he had had to draw upon the reserve armies in the Alps and North Africa, despite the increasing threat from Italy.

As a result of the disastrous opening phase of the campaign, some 25 infantry divisions had been destroyed. Thirteen out of the original 31 active infantry divisions had gone, and six out of the seven motorised divisions. Six out of the original 13 light cavalry, light mechanised, and armoured divisions which Gamelin had deployed on the morning of May 10 had also been removed from the board. Nevertheless, Weygand had managed to form three striking groups out of his surviving armoured units. On June 5, 1940, they were ready for the fight: the first, under General Pétiet, around Forges-les-Eaux, the second, under General Audet, in the Beauvais area, and the third, under General Buisson, in the Vouziers area. Weygand, therefore, cannot be accused of having failed to create an armoured reserve, albeit a sadly depleted one.

Reynaud's "Breton redoubt"

After Weygand's plan had been accepted by the War Committee on May 25, he had to reject an idea expressed by Reynaud in a note on the 29th; this had required him "to plan for the establishment of a national redoubt around a war port, allowing us to make use of the sealanes and above all to communicate with our allies. This national redoubt should be arranged and supplied, particularly with explosives, to make it *a veritable fortress*. It would consist of the Breton peninsula. The government would remain in the capital and would continue the war by making use of our naval and air forces in North Africa."

Attractive as this idea sounded on paper, the limited resources and the lack of time at the end of May 1940 made it an impossibility. Weygand put it in a nutshell: "The organisation of a 'veritable fortress' would need, after the construction of strongpoints along some 94 miles of front, the diverting of manpower and all kinds of war material, in particular anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns. All these resources were already insufficient to meet the needs of the defence line in process of organisation along the Somme and the Aisne; there could be no question of diverting even a small part of them; for even if it had been possible, there was not enough time."

Assistance from the Allies

How much help did France receive from her allies?

In his 2nd Army Group, General Prételat had two divisions of Polish infantry who were soon to put up a magnificent fight under the most desperate conditions. So did the British 51st Division, on the left flank of 10th Army. But the British armoured division, under Major-General R. Evans, serving in the same sector, has been described by one of its officers as "a caricature of an armoured division," not even equipped with "half its official tank strength, no field guns, insufficient anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, without infantry, without air cover, deprived of most of its auxiliary services, with part of its staff in a vehicle 'armoured' with plywood . . ."

So much for the actual forces in the field. As far as the future of the British co-operation in the Battle of France was concerned, the picture was not good. At a meeting of the Supreme War Council on May 31, Churchill held forth with his customary resolution – but when it came down to details he became reticent and vague. According to the minutes of the meeting, "Mr. Winston Churchill observed that the problem of the invasion of England had changed in appearance, and that yet again he could promise nothing before he knew what could be saved from the North.

"As far as air reinforcements were concerned, he did not have the authorisation of his Government to grant more than had been given."

When Reynaud tried to explain the "vital character" of the battle of the Somme to Churchill, he received the following reply, which Paul Baudouin has preserved: "M. Churchill finally declared that he would think over the French requests and reply to them soon. Perhaps a Canadian division might be ready by June 22; perhaps one of the divisions from Dunkirk.

"Fourteen British divisions were being trained, armed only with rifles and machine guns. He intended to draw upon the entire forces of the Empire for:
"eight Indian battalions;
"eight battalions from Palestine;
"14,000 Australians;
"the 2nd Canadian Division;
"one brigade from Narvik.
"But he returned to the necessity of guarding Britain . . ."

As far as the British land forces were concerned, post-war studies have indeed established these meagre figures as exact. But how sound were Churchill's motives for insisting that R.A.F. Fighter Command must be kept out of the battle for the Somme?

Where was the R.A.F.?

Churchill's supporters have endorsed the view that Britain would certainly have been invaded in September 1940, if the fighters of the R.A.F. had been sacrificed in the Battle of France. But this viewpoint needs examination. It implies that Churchill was in reality far more pessimistic about the French Army's capacity for resistance than he cared to admit, and that is why he refused to commit the Spit-

res nd Hurricanes in France. What are he tacts? Could the large-scale intervention of British fighters have turned the cale of the Battle of France?

It could be argued that the total sacrifice f R.A.F. Fighter Command in France would have had punishing effects upon the uftwaffe. The German air fleets might ave suffered such heavy losses that they would have been unable to mount any arge-scale air offensives against Britain during the autumn and winter of 1940. Moreover, had the 600-odd fighters at the R.A.F.'s disposal entered the fray, they would have been able to count on the aid of the 350–400 French fighters which were surrendered when the armistice was signed.

Against this, it could be claimed that a transfer to France of R.A.F. Fighter Command would have squandered Britain's trump card. For in France the Spitfires and Hurricanes would have been operating without the benefit of radar, a proper logistical backing and the tactical advantage of operating over their own territory, which gave them a considerable endurance advantage over the Germans in the Battle of Britain.

Shadow of disaster

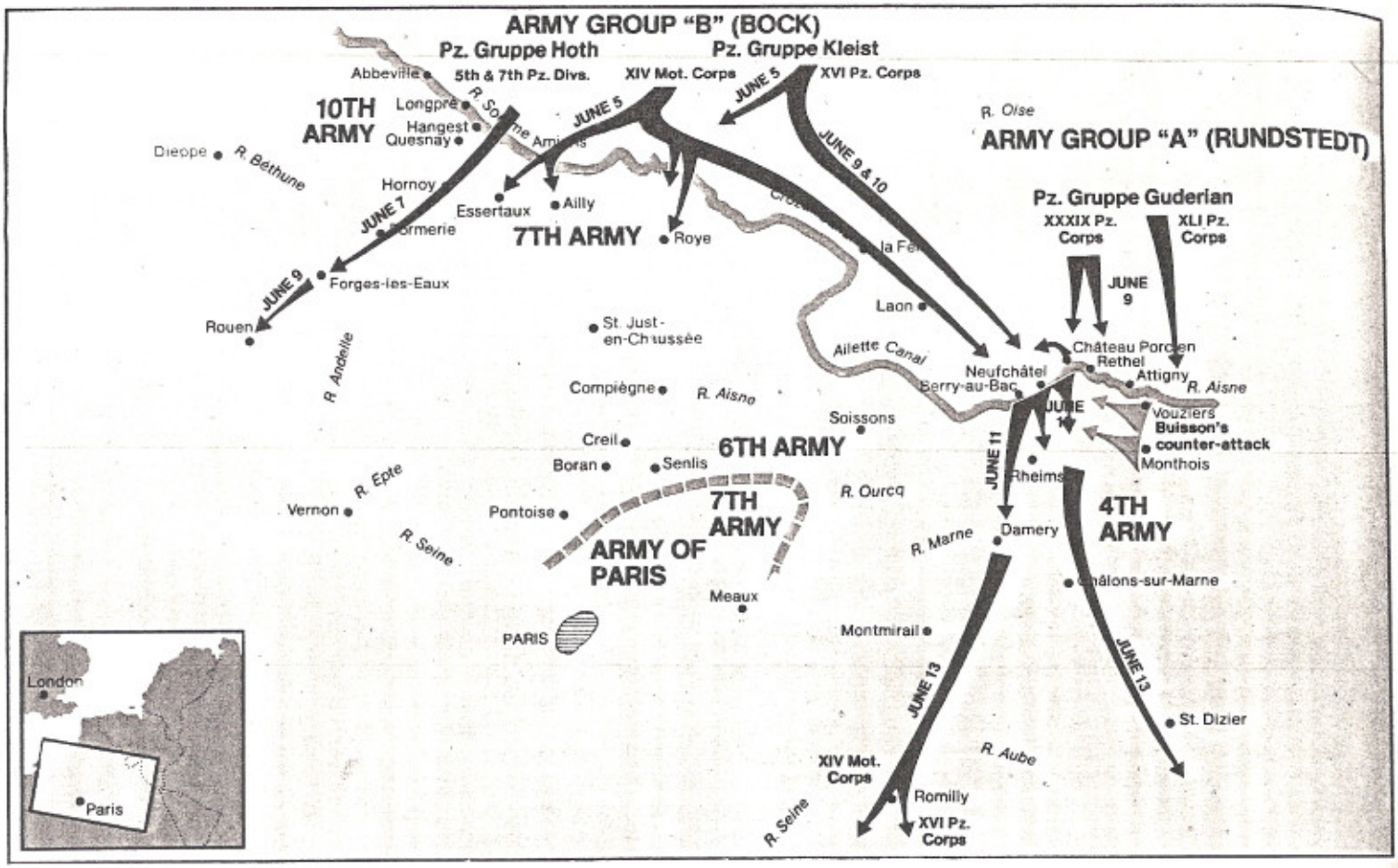
When he presented his battle plan to the War Committee on May 25, Weygand did not conceal the possibility that the time could well come when the French Army, given only these forces and with no hope of reinforcement, would have suffered such heavy losses that it could no longer hold the Germans. He stressed that it was essential "to stand fast on the present Somme-Aisne line and fight to the last there. This line has several weak points, in particular the Crozat Canal and the Ailette. We could be broken there. If this should happen the surviving fragments will dig in. Every part of the army must fight until it drops for the honour of the country."

It was then that President Lebrun made an intervention which Reynaud has described as "disastrous", but which was natural enough at the time. What would happen, he asked, if the French armies should be scattered and destroyed? In such a crisis the government would have no liberty of action whatsoever, if proposals of peace came from the Germans. True, the agreements made with Britain on March 28 forbade France from concluding a separate peace; but if "relatively advantageous" conditions were offered by the Reich, they should be examined with care. With Reynaud's agreement, Weygand suggested that Britain should be sounded out on every question which would result from the total destruction of the French armies.

After the surrender of Belgium, Weygand once again raised the subject with Reynaud. Listing the reinforcements which France should request from Britain, he added: "It also seems necessary that the British Government be made aware of the fact that a time might come when France would find herself, against her will, unable to continue a military struggle to protect her soil."

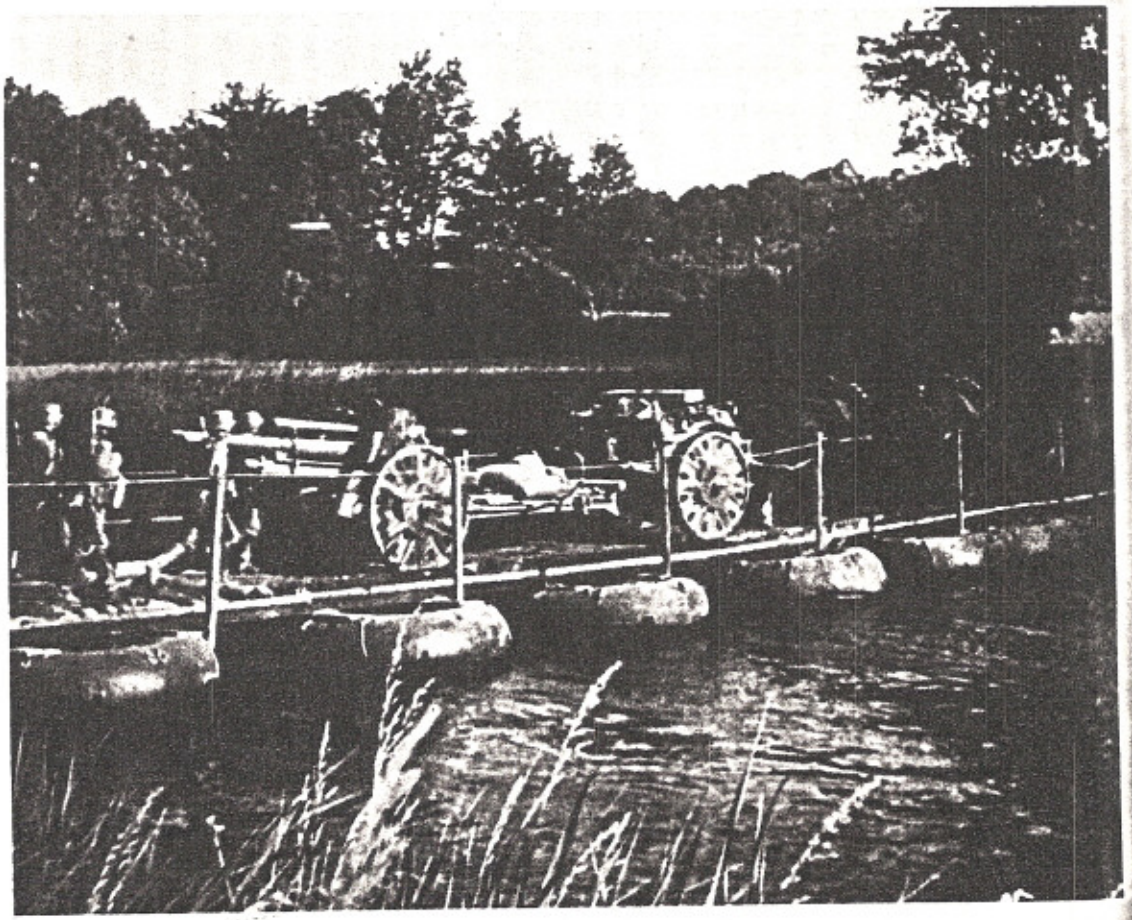
It was this possibility which made Reynaud suggest the formation of a "Breton Redoubt". But as we have seen, it would have been impossible for Weygand to withdraw from the line the 12 or so divisions which this would entail. In any case, on June 5 Reynaud made yet another change in his cabinet. Baudouin replaced Daladier as Foreign Minister, Bouthillier replaced Lamoureux as Finance Minister – and Charles de Gaulle, promoted to the

◁ A German squad at work in the ruins of Amiens, which had suffered very severe damage in the course of the German assault. ◁▽ An infantryman picks his way cautiously towards a burning house. ▽ One of the 92,000 dead that the French suffered in the course of the six-week German offensive.



△ *The inexorable advance of the Germans southward in a gradual envelopment of Paris. Army Group "A" crossed the Aisne at Neufchâtel on June 9 and reached the Marne three days later. The 7th Panzer Division of Army Group "B" moved from the Somme to the Seine in three days, then turned north-west to trap 46,000 French and British troops against the Channel coast. Terrific resistance by the French around Amiens failed to prevent Strauss' 9th Army reaching Soissons by the evening of June 6. The German entry into Paris was barely a week away.*

▽ *German artillery crosses a pontoon bridge over the Marne, the furthest extent of their advance into France in 1914. The gun is the standard 10.5 cm field howitzer. Most of the German artillery at this point of the war was horse-drawn.*



temporary rank of brigadier-general, became Under-Secretary for War.

The last act begins

Facing Weygand's 71 divisions, the German commander of Operation "Red" had massed 143 divisions – seven more than on May 10. Three of them had come from the German-Soviet frontier zone, thanks to the benevolent attitude of Stalin and Molotov since the Norwegian campaign. Three others had been diverted from the *Ersatzheer* or training army. And the single infantry division which had been occupying Denmark was also transferred to France. For the coming battle, Hitler and the O.K.W. staff installed themselves in the Belgian village of Brûly-de-Pesche, not far from the O.K.H. headquarters at Chimay.

The French 3rd Army Group was about to be attacked by a new and formidable German concentration under Bock. As the woods and steep gradients of the Chemin-des-Dames were unfavourable for armour, the new mass Panzer assault with its usual air support was to be made on the plain of Picardy: Kleist's *Panzergruppe* striking from Péronne and Amiens, and XV Panzer Corps debouching from Longpré, where Rommel's 7th Panzer Division held the railway-bridge. The battle was to rage for 48 hours without the French showing any signs of breaking. In fact, on the evening of June 5 Colonel-General von Bock noted in his war diary: "The French are defending themselves stubbornly."

Certainly, the new tactics which the French were using would not keep the Panzers at bay for long. "For the moment," wrote Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "[the French tactics] had the following advantage: around Amiens and Péronne, our armoured divisions were able to push their tanks into the gaps between the enemy strongpoints, but our infantry, caught by the flanking fire from the villages, could not follow up. For this reason it was not possible to commit our motorised divisions on the first day."

Strauss' 9th Army, on the Laon sector, also scored mediocre successes on the first day. At Army Group "B" H.Q., the first impression was that this would be a long, hard fight. At Ablaincourt, Captain Jungenfeld, commanding a tank battalion of the 4th Panzer Division, had nine tanks knocked out within minutes. Shortly afterwards his battalion suffered new losses and by noon had only penetrated some 6¼ miles into the French positions. Jungenfeld described the situation in the following words: "In front of us, every village and wood – one might even say every clump of trees – is literally stuffed with guns and defences; even small artillery detachments can put us under direct fire. Behind us is the glare of a vicious battle where one fights not only for each village, but for each house. We are not therefore surprised to find ourselves under fire from all quarters, and one could say: 'Nobody knows which is the front and which is the rear.' "

And resistance like this was being put up by the French 19th Division, covering seven miles of front and faced by two German corps. On June 6, Bock noted in his diary: "A serious day, rich in crises. It seems that we are in trouble." But at the moment when, "with a heavy heart", he was about to order XIV Motorised Corps to break off the action at Amiens to reinforce the attack of XVI Panzer Corps, he heard of the successes of his 9th and 4th Armies.

On the left of the German front, 9th Army had thrust across the Chemin des Dames and had reached the Aisne at Soissons. Better still, on the German right, XV Panzer Corps had broken through the French 10th Army, and Rommel's 7th Panzer Division surged forward to Formerie and Forges-les-Eaux on June 7, scattering the 17th Light Division.

This situation forced General Besson to order General Frère to pull back 7th Army into alignment with 6th Army on its right and 10th Army on its left. But this withdrawal amounted to the total sacrifice of the divisions which had defended the line of the Somme so valiantly, and certainly resulted in the loss of most of their heavy weapons. The 7th Panzer Division, exploiting its successes on the 7th, thrust towards Elbeuf, where the Seine bridges were destroyed at the approach of his first tanks, then swung north-west to reach the Channel at Fécamp. This move trapped General Ihler's IX Corps (which included the French 31st and 40th Divisions and part of the British 51st Division, which had been transferred from the Maginot Line) plus the survivors of 2nd and 5th Light Cavalry Divisions, trapped with their backs to the sea. On June 12, 46,000 French and British troops surrendered at St. Valéry-en-Caux, while 3,300 succeeded in breaking through the German Ring.

Winston Churchill was born in 1874, the son of a distinguished English politician and an American mother. At Harrow School and at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, he displayed little of the brilliance he was to reveal later in many fields.

During his early twenties he gained a reputation as a war correspondent in Cuba, South Africa and (as a serving officer) in India and Egypt; he subsequently became a prolific writer of biography, history, and war memoirs. In India he served on the North-West Frontier, and in Egypt took part in the Battle of Omdurman. In South Africa his escape from a Boer prison camp in 1899 brought him further notoriety. At the age of 26 he entered Parliament. He became Home Secretary in 1910, and First Lord of the Admiralty a year later, resigned in 1915 after the failure of the Dardanelles offensive, but before the war ended was appointed Minister of Munitions. In 1919 he organised the British Expedition against the Bolsheviks. From 1924 to 1929 he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, but all through the thirties he held no office. He became instead a lone voice against British complacency in the face of the rising European dictatorships, and was an untiring campaigner for rearmament. At the outbreak of war he returned to office as First Lord of the Admiralty, and after the fall of the appeaser Neville Chamberlain in May 1940 he was, even at the age of 65, the obvious and popular choice for Prime Minister.